

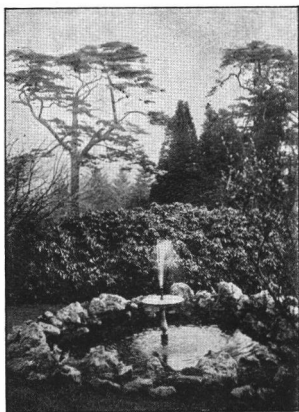
DERBYSHIRE ARCHÆOLOGICAL AND NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY.

South Sitch, Edridgehay.

By PERCY H. CURREY.



TIMBER BUILDINGS, owing to the cheapness of good building stone, are in this county comparatively rare, though in the middle ages they must have been almost universal; those which remain are chiefly seventeenth century works of a humble character, cottages and farm buildings constructed in the simplest manner possible, the timbers framed to form large square panels filled in with "wattle and daub," which has usually been replaced by brick-work. When we find here a timber-framed house of substantial construction, such as is comparatively common in Worcestershire, Cheshire, and elsewhere, it is an object of much interest. Such an example exists, though it does not from the outside reveal its interest at first



The Fountain. The yew tree arbour in the distance.

sight, in the house known as South Sitch, at Idridgehay, the residence of Mr. Bemrose, F.S.A., a member of the Council of this Society. Idridgehay (Iderich-hay or Ithersay according to Lysons, and to local pronunciation, fast dying out) lies in the prettiest part of the Ecclesbourne valley, and the picturesque situation and delightful old garden combine with the quaint character of the house to make an ideal summer residence.

With respect to the name, Mr. W. J. Andrew writes:—"The name Sitch very frequently occurs in old field names; I have always thought it meant a *marshy* dell or valley. It no doubt comes from the Saxon SICCH, which means a furrow, gutter, watercourse, etc., so if you combine the furrow and the watercourse you have what I thought it meant. In either case the name is applicable to South Sitch." The house is supposed to have been built by a member of the family of Mellor, who held considerable estates at Idridgehay until recent times. The family came originally from Mellor in the High Peak; Robert Mellor, of Mellor, is mentioned in the Hundred Rolls of 3 Ed. I. (1274). Lysons considers that the Mellors, of Idridgehay, who were settled there as early as the time of Henry VII., were a younger branch of this family; their pedigree is given fully in Glover's *Derbyshire*.* The direct line ceased with the death of Samuel Mellor in 1795, whose granddaughters and co-heiresses married

Cresswell and Cock, from the former of whom the present owner of South Sitch, Mr. F. Thornley, is descended. In 1638 a member of this family became the first Mayor of Derby; in 1637, according to Simpson's *History of Derby*, but in 1638 according to Hutton, King Charles I. granted to the town a new Charter, under which the two bailiffs were to become in succession the first Mayors; Henry Mellor was the first to take office, but died during his mayoralty, and was succeeded by his colleague, John Hope. Simpson's *History*



OLD IRON
CANDLESTICK
SOUTH SITCH

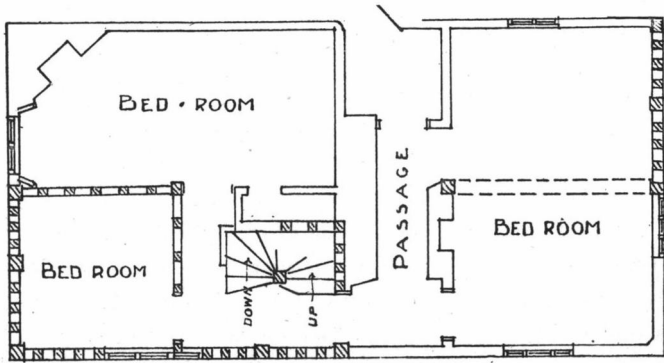
* Vol. ii., p. 561-2.

quotes a quaint punning epigram on Derby's first Mayor, from a book of epigrams published by Bancroft in 1639—

“ You seeme the prime bough of an ample tree
Whereon if fair expected fruits we see
Whilst others' fames with ranke reproaches meete
As mel or manna shall your name be sweete.”

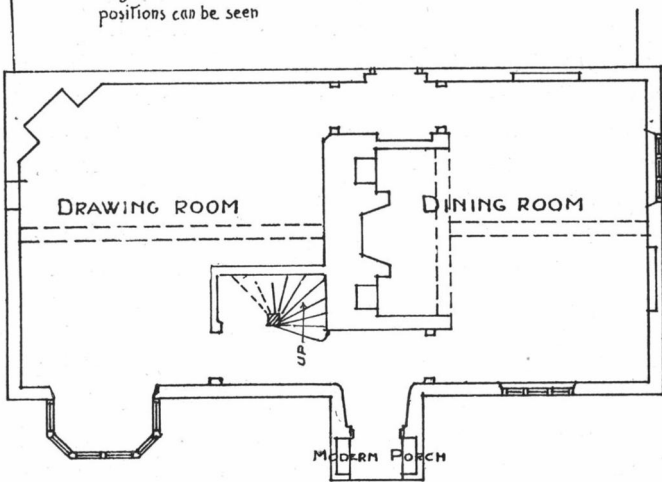
From Glover's account of this family we learn that Robert Mellor, of Iderichaye, who died in 1616, by will dated May 6th, 1615, devised a copyhold estate in Iderichaye to his son George in tail male, with remainder to his son Thomas in tail male, remainder to his right heirs. George Mellor, who appears to have been the youngest of four sons, married Millicent—and is described as in 1617 of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and in 1621 of Derby, B.A.; in 1659 he surrendered his copyhold at Idridgehay to his son Robert. This George Mellor would appear to have been the builder of the house at South Sitch, for on the oak tie-beam of the north gable of the house is cut 16211GMM, clearly indicating George and Millicent Mellor.

Externally the house does not proclaim its interest; most of the windows have been more or less altered in later times, and the whole of the walls covered with rough-cast, though the thatched roof, now becoming a rarity in Derbyshire, is still retained; but immediately upon entering, the position of the door in relation to the fireplace and the stairs, and the construction of the stairs themselves, tell the great age of the building; on mounting the stairs and examining the walls on the first floor the timber construction can in many places be easily traced through the wall papers with which it is covered, and when the attics are reached it is clearly exposed to view. The plan of the original house was extremely simple, and typical of the ordinary comfortable farmhouse of the period. It comprised on the ground floor two rooms, with the staircase between the two; the present dining-room, with its deeply recessed and cosy fireplace, would have been the general living room or house-place. If the second room, now used as a drawing-room, originally had any fireplace it seems that it must have been in the corner as at present, though



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

NOTE The timbers are shown only where their actual positions can be seen

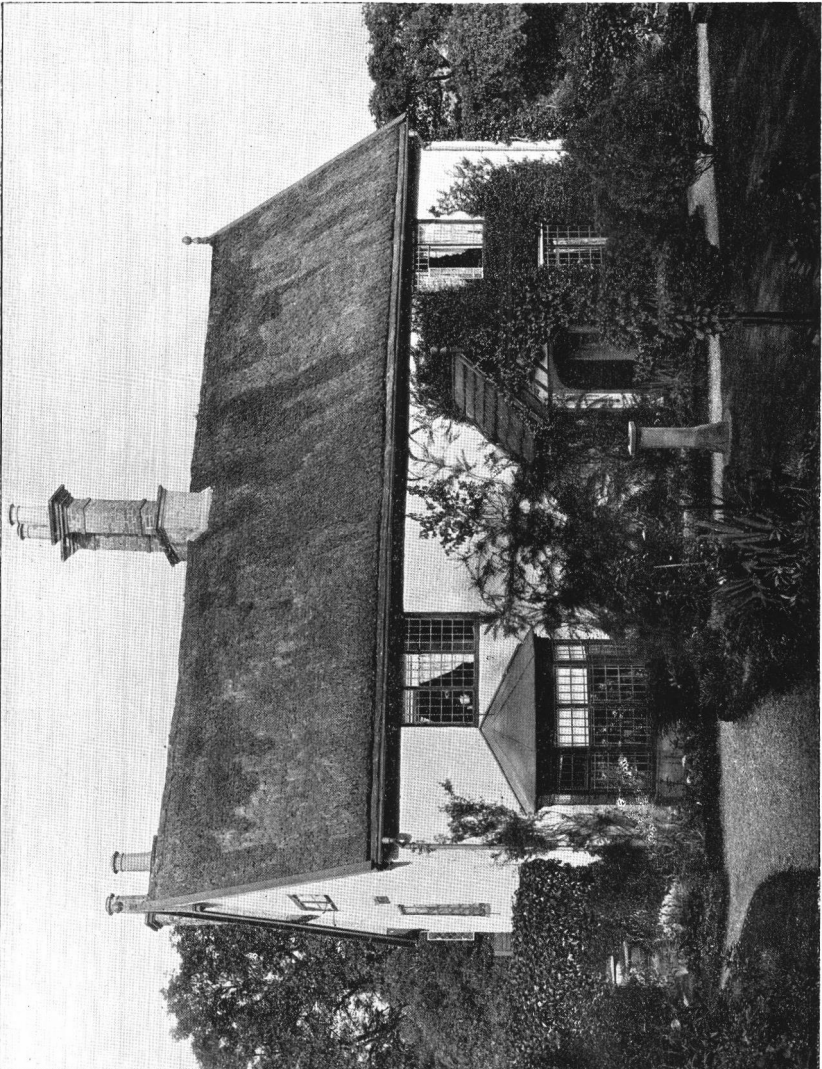


GROUND PLAN

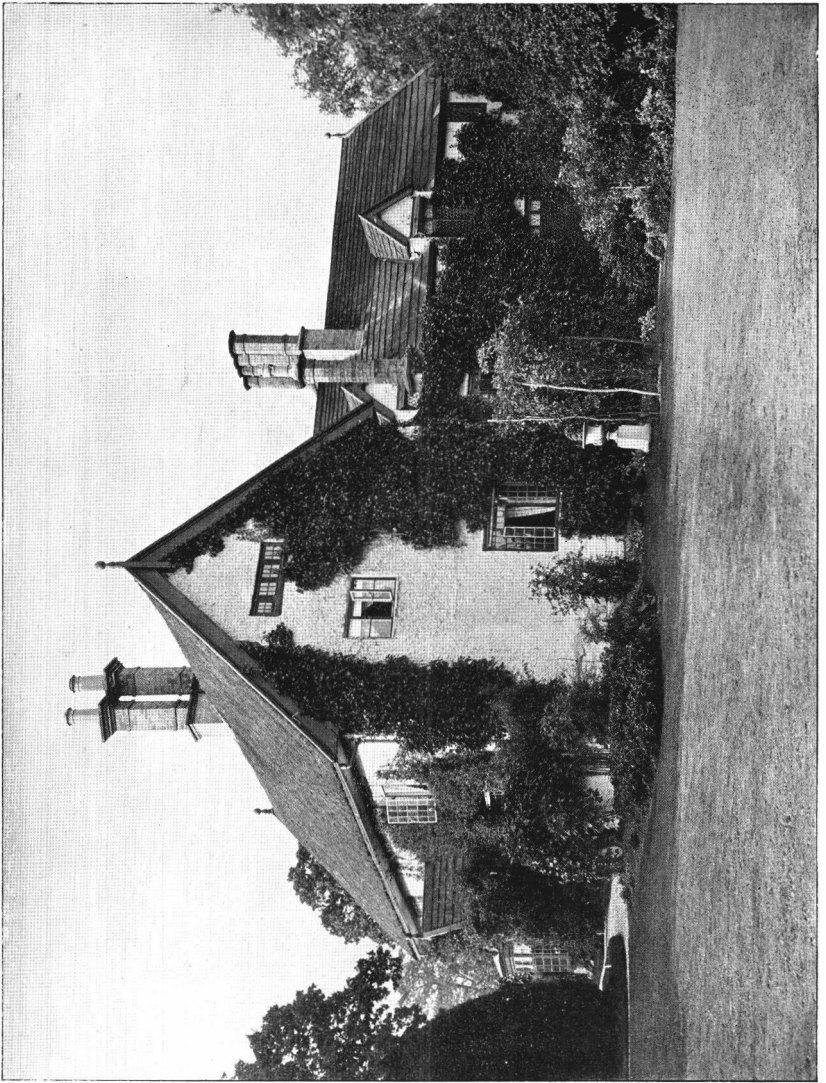
SCALE OF 10 5 0 10 20 30 FEET

R.H.C.
delt.

Plan of the House.



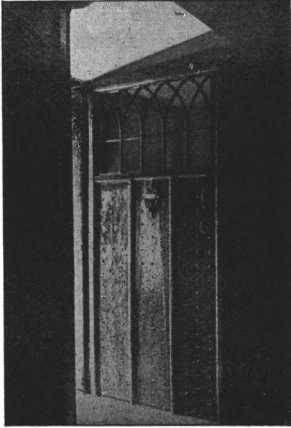
SOUTH SITCH, IDRIDGEHAY.



this would have been rather an unusual position ; it seems likely that there would have been a "lean-to" at the back for pantry, etc. The entrance to the house was in the usual place opposite the "speer," or side of the large chimney recess. The chamber floor comprises three bedrooms, and in its plan seems to be unaltered, except that a passage has been cut right through the great chimney to connect this part of the house with the more modern wing at the back. In the roof there are two large rooms practically unaltered since their first erection. The original staircase is worth noticing for the very small space which it occupies. A modern architect, wrestling with the intricacies of house planning combined with limited means and space, cannot help envying his predecessors who could dispose of a whole flight of stairs from floor to floor in an area of 6 ft. 6 ins. by 3 ft. The way in which the second flight of these stairs wriggles itself up into the attics so as to give head-room both above and below is quite ingenious. To suit a more luxurious age, a second staircase of easier ascent has been added in the modern wing of the house, but in the days when a step ladder was often the only means of access to cottage bedrooms, these winding stairs were probably considered more than adequate.

The construction of the building is of a simple and substantial character. The walls rest on a stone foundation forming a plinth all round ; the framing consists of principal upright timbers from 8 ins. to 10 ins. square and spaced at 4 ft. 6 ins. to 5 ft. apart, framed into heads and cills and stiffened in the usual manner by diagonal braces at the angles ; between these are framed the intermediate timbers, about 7 ins. in breadth and little more than that distance apart ; the spaces between the timbers have originally, of course, been filled in with lath and plaster, but, as has been before mentioned, the whole of the exterior has since been covered with a coating of rough-cast or pebble-dashed cement. If this coating were removed it is easy to picture the pretty effect of the black and white building, surrounded by its old-fashioned garden and background of fine old trees. Whether it would really be desirable to remove it is, however, question-

able. It is impossible to say how the original plastering between the timbers is carried. At Somersall Herbert Hall, probably the

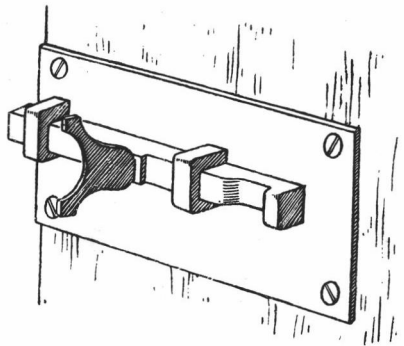


Door made of yew tree wood.

finest timber building in Derbyshire, the timbers are grooved about an inch back from both faces, and short oak laths are slipped into these grooves to carry the plaster; but this must have been rather a troublesome method, as each lath required somewhat careful fitting.

Both the chamber and attic floors are carried by heavy stop-chamfered oak beams running through the centre of the house from end to end and supporting the smaller floor joists. The floors are the ordinary "plaster floor" of the district; these were formed by laying reeds across the joists, on which was spread a layer of floor plaster, a coarse quality of calcined gypsum, sometimes mixed with crushed brick or other material; this was usually finished to a thickness of about $1\frac{1}{2}$ ins. and trowelled to a smooth face. These plaster floors were in common use in Derbyshire and the neighbouring counties up to the middle of the last century; before the introduction of the power-driven circular saw, when every board had to be laboriously cut by hand over a pit, floor-boards were an expensive luxury only found in first-class work.

The main entrance door is original, and a good example of the heavy studded



Bolt on door.

type, but, possibly in the eighteenth century, the upper portion has been glazed to light the entrance and stairs. The furnishings were no doubt added on the occasion of this alteration. The door at the foot of the attic stairs is also worth noting for the quaint wooden bolt by which it is secured. Some of the other doors, which can scarcely be so old as the house, seem like a rude attempt by country joiners to imitate a higher class of work than that to which they were accustomed; from outside they look like ordinary eighteenth century panelled doors,



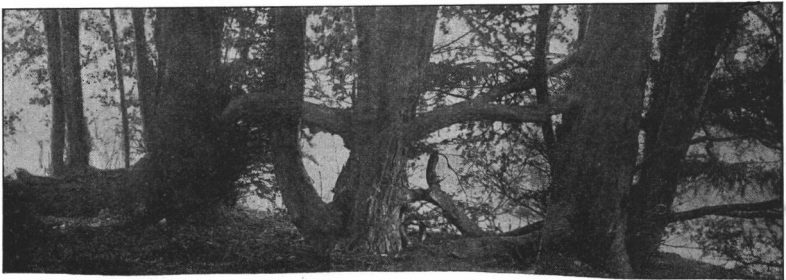
THE CHIMNEY IN THE ATTIC
SOUTH SITCH

but when opened they are found to be made in two thicknesses, the panels being formed of oak boards nailed to the back of the framing; some of these have early metal work fastenings, such as an iron handle to the drawing-room door, and a wrought-iron bolt of unusual design to that of one of the bedrooms. The only windows that have not been altered at one time or another are the four little square lights high up in the south gable.

One of the most interesting features of the house is the great timber and plaster chimney in the attic; this is now crowned

externally with a brick chimney stack, and it is difficult to say how it originally finished above the thatched roof. A wooden chimney seems, according to our modern ideas, a very dangerous contrivance, and there is no doubt that in the days of timber building fires were of very frequent occurrence, but it has to be remembered that with wood fires on an open hearth and with a wide chimney the heat would never be very great. A plastered chimney was taken down about ten years ago in a very old cottage at Little Eaton, and the timbers showed but slight traces of the action of the fire.

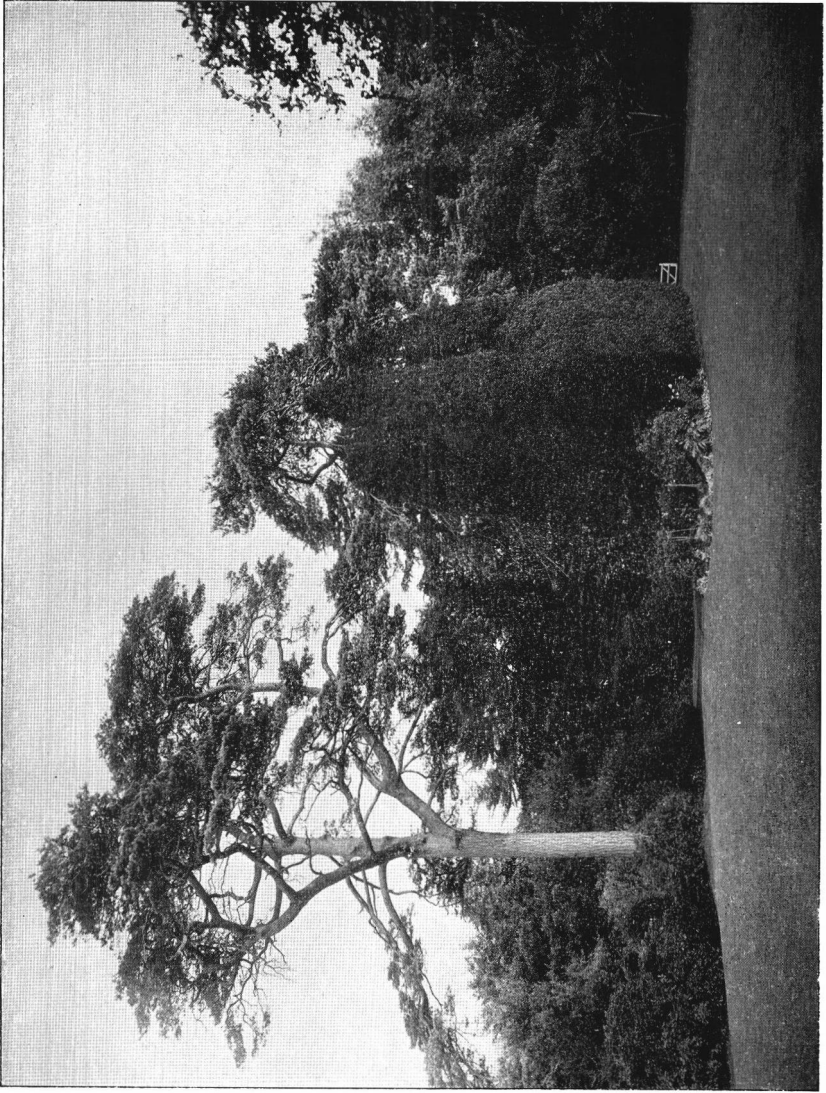
Not the least pleasant feature of South Sitch is the delightful old-fashioned garden, with its well kept turf and sheltering belt



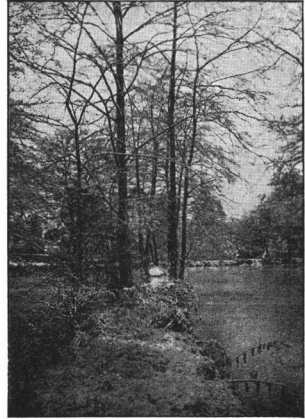
Stems of Trees.

of trees, which contains a curiosity in its yew arbour, well shown in one of the accompanying photographic plates. This was fashioned of seven yew trees planted to form three sides of a square, the fourth being left as an entrance; the boughs of the trees have been arched over and grafted into the stems of their neighbours opposite and on each side, so that each tree now draws nourishment from the roots of the others. It would be interesting to ascertain the date of this very unusual example of the gardener's art. Topiary work was popular at the time when the house was built, and was revived in the days of Queen Anne.

In the *sich* or dell of the garden winds a tiny stream, which nevertheless supplies a large fishpond and a fountain in its



course. Originally there were two fishponds, but that opposite the house has long ago been drained and planted. These ponds are probably survivals of the time when even an older house stood at South Sitch, for in mediæval days fishponds were an almost necessary adjunct to a manor house. At Hulland, for instance, three or four miles away, the ancient moated hall has gone, and the moat is dry, but the fine series of fishponds, constructed, to quote an ancient charter, "where the place gives opportunity," remain to remind us of an age when fresh-water fish formed an important item in the larder of a self-contained community.



The Fishpond.

In these days, though, thanks to our Archæological Societies, our more monumental antiquities are generally well cared for, the buildings of a humbler but not less interesting class are rapidly disappearing to make way for more pretentious, but not always more comfortable, houses. Our thanks should, therefore, be given to anyone who will undertake the trouble and sometimes the expense of maintaining them. May South Sitch always have an owner who will lovingly preserve it so long as its old wooden walls will hold together.

For the photographic plates illustrating this article we are indebted to Mr. A. Victor Haslam, and for the small photographs and the sketch of the bolt to Mr. J. Somes Storey.